



## Presentation

Anne Malena

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The Caribbean in Translation

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## Presentation

The Caribbean is translation. From the time of the “discovery” of the Americas to current globalization, the Caribbean region has been constructed along a semiotic process of naming, interpreting and writing which is the very process of translation. Whether success or failure, the dynamics of translation inform Caribbean identity both within the region and in the diaspora. As early as 1493, through Columbus’ physical presence and writings, European imagination was projected onto the site, replacing its fast disappearing Indian inhabitants and cultures with colonial trappings. Thus started a tug of war process of appropriation and resistance that continues to this day to shape the region. Successive cultural translations, forced by catastrophic events such as the eradication of Indian populations, the introduction of slavery, the rise and fall of the sugar industry and the modern colonial venture of tourism, have meant an uneasy blending of multiple influences, an impossible return to origins, a painful process of creolization, migration and emigration, a vast diaspora and a literature telling it all. Each island and coastal region negotiates its own political and cultural identity in relation to its Caribbean neighbours and respective metropolis. Viewed as sites of translation, therefore, Caribbean texts illustrate the complexity of the dynamics of representation in the way they echo and contrast with each other.

Given this context and its metaphorical value, the concrete practice of Caribbean translation faces many problems whose investigation and occasional proposed solutions contribute to the field of Translation Studies on many levels, linguistic, literary, cultural and postcolonial. One common theme in the papers included here is that of creole as a vehicle for orality, a force of resistance to colonial languages and the expression of cultural specificity. Since very little translation is done with a Caribbean audience in mind, the danger of translating a Caribbean text from one European language into another is always to renew the colonial gesture of appropriation and either erase or exoticize creole. Since publishing of these texts is often done in a strong didactic perspective, the onus is on the translators to make them as accessible as possible but without any clear criteria about what is to be elucidated and what can be left in the shadow of indeterminacy. The

translation of creole expressions and passages is a particularly poignant problem since, as a language and a metaphor, creole has long been at the centre of identity politics in the Caribbean. Theories such as *antillanité*, creoleness, *mestizaje*, to name but a few, have long debated the place of creole in identity definitions and the varied ways it may or may not function as the nugget of truth in the formulation of an illusory Caribbean essence. Creole languages embody difference and negate equivalence, making it very difficult to translate from one to the other without losing the semantic depth their painful origins have given them.

Since Caribbean literature is by definition a literature of displacement it maintains a synecdochic relationship with literary canons that is fraught with difficulties. Before decolonization movements had any effect on curriculums, generations of writers were educated in the European traditions and usually ended up pursuing their careers in the metropolises. More recently, and decolonization being far from over, very few writers manage to stay at home and live in exile or, as it were, in translation. Many live and work in North American and European contexts, often contributing to the construction of critical discourse on the Caribbean from the outside while others live and work in the Caribbean but have to publish in North America and Europe in order to be read. This situation impacts on the literature by blurring the boundaries between centre and periphery and creating a dialogic to and fro movement between the two. The centre is still being projected onto the periphery while the periphery rewrites the centre. The most striking example of this has been and continues to be the multiple rewritings of *The Tempest* and the many re-appropriations of Caliban—Lamming, Retamar, Césaire, etc.—in an effort to re-name, re-interpret and re-possess. The intertextuality generated by these practices is a fact of translation and carries a self-reflexive dimension, questioning its own conditions and possibilities of production.

It is in the hope to inspire much needed further research in this area that we offer this special issue on *Les Antilles en traduction/The Caribbean in Translation* which would not have come about without the encouragement of Jean-Marc Gouanvic, the professionalism and calm efficiency of Annick Chapdelaine and the always cheerful and prompt replies to my pesky requests on the part of the contributors, all of whom I give warm thanks to.

**Anne Malena**  
**University of Alberta**